

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

This chapter provides a brief introduction to the study of information skills in the academic writing of primary school English language teachers. It starts with a brief overview of the English language situation in schools and the performance of pupils and teachers in English in primary schools. It also explains why the Teacher Training Division of the Malaysian Ministry of Education introduced a 14-week English language Immersion Course and the purpose of "information skills" in the whole course. It also explains why "information skills" was introduced in the whole course.

In the background to the study, the researcher highlights the primary school English language syllabus and its relationship to the National Education Philosophy. A brief study is also made of the importance of information skills and English language learning in this present information age, especially from the viewpoint of Smart Schools.

As the background of the school is not complete, a study of pupils' as well as teachers' proficiency and attitudes in the English language teaching-learning process is also made. The researcher then goes on to state the research problem and gives her reasons as to why she focused solely on "information skills" and not the other areas in the English Language Immersion Course. She then highlights the objectives of the study and gives a description of the participants and the contents of information skills in the Immersion Course. The significance of the study is highlighted by showing the importance of

information skills for writing and its growing impact on the present information age, especially in terms of acquiring, retrieving and processing information. The chapter ends with some common definitions of terms used constantly throughout the research.

1.1 Background to the Study

The Ministry of Education has repeatedly voiced its concern over the standard of English in schools throughout the nation, especially in rural schools. Why does this situation exist? Perhaps some background into the English Language Primary School Syllabus and the existing situation in primary schools would help the reader understand the declining standard of the English language in schools.

1.1.1 The Primary School English Language Syllabus

The English language syllabus for primary schools aims to equip pupils with basic skills and knowledge of the English language so as to enable them to communicate both orally and in writing, in and out of school. Furthermore, the English language programme for the primary school is planned in accordance with the goals of the National Education Philosophy.

1.1.1.1 The National Education Philosophy and its Aims

The National Education Philosophy aims to develop individuals, physically, intellectually, spiritually and emotionally in order that they contribute to the betterment of society and nation. This development will also contribute towards achieving the objective of making Malaysia a fully developed nation.

1.1.1.2 The National Education Philosophy and the English Language Syllabus

The Malaysian National Philosophy of Education underpins every element of the primary school English language syllabus in terms of content, moral values and thinking skills.

Education in Malaysia is an on-going effort towards further developing the potential of individuals in a holistic and integrated manner, so as to produce individuals who are intellectually, spiritually, emotionally and physically balanced and harmonious, based on a firm belief in and devotion to God. Such an effort is designed to produce Malaysian citizens who are knowledgeable and competent, who possess high moral standards, and who are responsible and capable of achieving high levels of personal well-being as well as being able to contribute to the harmony and betterment of the family, the society and the nation at large.

(The National Education Philosophy)

The National Education Philosophy also underpins every element of the Smart School Conceptual Model as described below.

1.1.1.3 The National Education Philosophy and the Smart School Conceptual Model

Malaysia's National Philosophy of Education calls for "developing the potential of individuals in a holistic and integrated manner, so as to produce individuals who are intellectually, spiritually, emotionally and physically balanced and harmonious". The catalyst for this massive transformation will be technology-supported Smart Schools which will determine the way the educational system achieves the National Philosophy of Education, while fostering the development of a work force prepared to meet the challenges of the next century.

Transforming the educational system will entail changing the nature of Malaysia's primary school English language syllabus, moving away from memory-based learning designed for the average pupil to an education that stimulates thinking, creativity and caring in all pupils, which caters to individual abilities and learning styles and is based on more equitable access. It will require pupils to exercise greater responsibility for their own education.

The Smart School curriculum has been designed to:

1. help pupils achieve overall balanced development
2. integrate knowledge, skills, values and correct use of language
3. state explicitly intended learning outcomes for different ability levels
4. offer multidisciplinary, thematic and continuous learning
5. foster the knowledge, skills and attitudes appropriate for success in the Information Age.

As one of the salient features of the Smart School curriculum is the "correct use of language", it is pertinent to study the status of the English language in primary schools to ascertain the progress of primary school pupils towards this Information Age.

1.1.2 The Position of the English Language in Primary Schools

1.1.2.1 Pupil Proficiency

Although the aims of the primary school English language syllabus are noble, they appear realistic only for urban children. Those from rural schools have failed to meet the requirements of this syllabus owing to lack of exposure to the English language. Many factors have contributed to the current levels of performance in English in rural schools. The factors range from a poor linguistic environment in school as well as at home, unmotivated pupils as well as a lack of qualified English language teachers. In school the only English speaking person would sometimes be the English teacher herself. The *lingua franca* in a rural setting is basically Bahasa Melayu and teaching English in this poor linguistic environment would prove to be futile in most instances. At home too, no one speaks English and as such the English acquired laboriously in school would be lost totally, due to lack of use. As Bahasa Melayu is the medium of instruction in all schools and as English is taught only as a subject in schools, most of the pupils are not motivated to learn English language fervently. They do not see the necessity of learning the English language as they could function very well with just Bahasa Melayu. This is the situation that exists in most of the primary schools in rural areas.

1.1.2.2 Teacher Proficiency and Attitude

The majority of the teachers in this research were educated in schools where Bahasa Melayu was the main medium of instruction. With this linguistic background for English language learning, it is not surprising that many of these teachers lack confidence in the use of the English language. Furthermore, with lack of reading and limited vocabulary and poor pupil proficiency in schools where they teach, teachers tend to resort to translation when explaining meanings of words, phrases and concepts.

It is pertinent at this juncture to make a distinction between rural and urban schools. Most of the rural schools are in remote areas and they are cut off from city life. In addition they lack adequate facilities for teaching and accomodation, thus deterring good teachers from teaching in such schools. Furthermore, the Education Ministry's aims of introducing the Smart School concept in rural schools has pressurised good senior language teachers into leaving the teaching profession for greener pastures.

With the advent of information technology, a good mastery of the English language is necessary for information acquisition, retrieval and application. Hence there is greater emphasis on the teaching and learning of English language in schools. This further adds to the burden of teachers in schools as extra classes have to be held to cater to the needs of the Information Era.

In an urban setting, a diffident teacher will suffer disastrous consequences, sometimes leading to complaints in leading newspapers in the country about a teacher's

poor proficiency. Teachers' errors in spoken as well as written language and inadequate preparation of classroom lessons further complicates the language problem in schools. It does not take long for proficient pupils to realise that their English language teacher is not proficient in the language. Over a period of time, this will prove to be detrimental to the pupil-teacher relationship, resulting in pupils' loss of confidence in the teacher's teaching skills. Teachers who lack mastery of the English language, must be sent for in-service training.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

The researcher found that English language teachers who come for in-service training programmes in Teacher Training Colleges, besides being weak in language skills are also not well-equipped with information handling skills. They are unable to acquire and process information accurately and effectively. Many teachers are still ignorant about the wealth of information sources and strategies available for academic writing and for their own self-development.

Owing to this problem, there is a dire need to make English language teachers aware of the availability of a wide range of information sources for academic writing. It is hoped that they would take-off from there and equip their own pupils with information-handling skills. In this way, English language teachers would be able to provide the link between language skills and abilities and information handling skills for their pupils.

1.3 Context of Study

In an effort to improve English language proficiency among pupils in rural areas, the Teacher Training Division of the Malaysian Ministry of Education introduced a 14-week Immersion course for all primary school English language teachers in 1991. The focus of this course was on the improvement of the teachers' own proficiency.

The aims of the 14-Week English Language Immersion Course were to upgrade participants' competence and performance in English to enable them to become effective and efficient teachers of English in Malaysian schools and to provide participants with the means of enhancing their professional and personal development.

The objectives of the course were

- (1) To immerse participants in a rich English language environment
- (2) To provide challenges that stretch their existing language capabilities
- (3) To establish contexts which will facilitate effective communication in four language skills
- (4) To guide them to an appreciation of the form and aesthetic qualities of the English language
- (5) To equip them with a knowledge of the grammatical system of English
- (6) To equip them with information handling skills in the context of the English language proficiency programme

- (7) To enable them to reflect on their roles and to function as competent classroom teachers of English.

(Immersion Syllabus, 1991: iii)

The course comprised four components namely,

- A. Core components
- B. Immersion for the English language teacher
- C. Practicum
- D. Coursework Assessment and Evaluation.

Of the four components above, the most important component for this study was component B which comprised areas such as aural-oral skills, reading skills, writing skills, information skills, grammar and enrichment activities. For the purposes of this study, the researcher focused her attention specifically on information skills, thus leaving out the other areas. It is believed that in this information age, it is very important to learn to acquire and process information through the medium of language. Language is a tool for learning and provides access to information. Thus the teacher needs to be made aware of the wide range of information sources and strategies. The teacher must provide the link between language abilities and information handling skills for his or her pupils.

As information skills is crucial for the writing of the academic report which is known as the practicum report in the English Language Immersion Course, it is believed that a knowledge of information skills would facilitate the writing of the practicum report and improve the participants' writing skills on the whole.

1.3.1 Information Skills in the 14-Week English Language Immersion Course

In the context of the 14-week English Language Immersion Course, the use of themes formed the basis for the integration of content, language skills and information skills. In this course, emphasis was given to the actual practice of information skills such as selecting the theme and defining the topic, locating and retrieving information on the topic, recording information and finally organising information for the practicum reports. Information skills was one of the components of the 14-week English language Immersion Course and it provided many of the strategies necessary for the writing of the practicum report. It is a skill that teachers must master if they are planning to use English to further their academic and professional careers.

A number of perceptions about information skills (derived from the syllabus) and how this can be taught, guide the design of the course.

1. The idea that information skills can be isolated and taught in small sections and practised in isolation seems to have just as many pitfalls as the notion that a language can be split into its component parts and taught to and practised by students in isolation from communicative use, or without the motivation and need to operate functionally in the language.
2. Information skills have, of course, direct links with linguistic skills and language operations.
3. The communicative variables such as setting, purpose and shared knowledge, will therefore affect those information skills procedures which

involve extracting types of information, synthesis, categorisation and ordering of information and relating new information to old.

4. The teacher-learner has to perfect her techniques of making choices and decisions. She has to plan her strategy of handling effectively the flow of in-coming data that contains real information which may be disguised in inferences, ellipses or varying emphasis.
5. Such techniques or strategies can be best activated only when the learner is aware of the purpose of her presence at the interface between what she knows and what is coming in and further that the learner needs to be aware of her personal relationship to these goals. In other words, the learner knows what she is expected to do with the source of information and she knows she has decisions to make that depend on her personal opinions and concepts.

1.4 Rationale for the Study

Ever since the inception of the 14-week English Language Immersion Course in teacher training colleges, several primary school English language teachers have been trained in the tenets of basic proficiency. To the Non-TESL teacher this course was a novelty whereas for the TESL teacher, this course was regarded as a refresher course calculated to refresh their 'jaded' teaching skills. In a teaching-learning situation where motivation to learn the English language is lacking due mainly to the poor English language environment existing in most schools, it is clear that the impetus must come from the

teacher herself. It is a proficient English teacher who will feel at ease with the language and write confidently.

In the course of their study, the English Language Immersion course participants have manifested a variety of writing abilities. It is this varying writing ability of course participants that prompted the researcher to carry out a research pertaining to the writing skills of the Immersion Course participants. Much of the writing activity of course participants was concentrated in the writing of the practicum reports as it was a partial fulfilment of the English Language Immersion Course and the guide to writing these reports stemmed from the course component on information skills. Hence the researcher decided to study the writing abilities of the Immersion Course participants in relation to information skills in order to get a clearer picture of the participants' information gathering and processing skills.

Increasingly, our teachers are themselves the products of a system, where English is taught as a second language. It is hoped that the component "Information Skills" in the 14-week English Language Immersion course, introduced by the Teacher Training Division of the Ministry of Education, would help teachers of English learn more about the language as well as through the language.

In conclusion, the rationale for this study was to gauge how course participants accessed information and how they applied this information in an organised fashion in their practicum reports.

1.5 Objectives of the Study

This study is carried out to find out

- (a) the range of information sources used by the participants in their practicum reports, such as library books, journals, dictionaries, internet, interviews, visits to information agencies and so forth.
- (b) whether the participants had acquired the strategies for information use
- (c) whether the participants had applied their knowledge of information skills effectively through note-taking skills and
- (d) whether the participants had mastered the fundamentals of writing such as cohesion and coherence, in the practicum reports.

1.6 Description of the Participants and Contents of the Information Skills course

This course is hinged upon the framework of Study Skills. Study Skills, in the context of this course, refers to comprehension of lectures on Information Skills; note-taking; library skills; locating and retrieving information from various sources for the practicum report and finally planning and writing the practicum report.

1.6.1 Lecture Comprehension and Note-taking

Lecture comprehension and note-taking go hand-in-hand. In the case of lecture comprehension, there are two salient features which cannot be ignored, mainly, decoding and comprehending. Decoding is not much of a problem for English language teachers trained in the rudiments of English as a Second Language. However, non-TESL English language teachers, not trained in the tenets of TESL (Teaching English as a Second Language), when attending an in-service training programme, face difficulty in accurate decoding purely due to inaccurate listening to English especially to English rhythm and stress.

The non-TESL course participants from primary schools, stem from a background where contact with English is confined to the study of textbooks and where dictionary provides a ready-made answer to comprehension. Owing to this, they find the lecture system difficult to adapt to and they fail to decipher the ways in which the lecturer structures his/her discourse. Here, course participants need to be taught how language is put together, that is, they need knowledge of cohesion, how items of language are linked together and how they depend on one another. This knowledge is acquired through the section called 'Recording Information' and 'Note-taking', found in the Information Skills syllabus. After completing this section of the course, participants should be able to identify relationships between sentences to show what the writer is thinking. Lecture comprehension by course participants would be assessed

through a series of comprehension exercises on authentic lectures pertaining to information skills.

Most participants are accustomed to taking notes and therefore think that they have nothing to learn on the subject. However, participants frequently waste energy by taking more notes than they need, or the converse, take inadequate notes that they lack information which they require later. Note-taking methods are presented via the medium of the overhead projector with the lecturer developing each stage. This is followed by weekly lectures of two-hour duration.

1.6.2 Library Skills

Study skills entail Library Skills. Many English courses aim to develop reading comprehension skills and ignore the reference or library skills which students need when selecting texts. Library skills help course participants scan vertically and horizontally to extract certain information; speed read a selected passage; look up references in a card or book index within a stated time; consult a dictionary or an encyclopaedia for a given subject; write out a bibliography card in an accepted style; and interpret information conveyed by graphs, diagrams and tables.

To consolidate the acquisition of library skills amongst course participants, materials consisting of a set of workcards designed for library skills, are administered to participants for practice. These workcards are on a self-access individualised instruction basis so that participants can work at their own pace with only introductory and periodical supervision.

1.6.3 Planning and Writing the Practicum Report

A practicum report is a formal report and it differs from other kinds of writing in that it must be documented. The course participants are therefore made aware that the practicum report must be based on facts, observations, experiments or evidence that can be verified by the reader. The basic framework of the report includes choosing a topic; demonstrating his/her knowledge of sources of information such as observation, interrogation (interview, questionnaire) and experiment; producing a rough outline; composing a bibliography; demonstrating the use of note-taking, through note-cards; writing a paper after making final amendments; preparing the format, for example, title page, introduction, table of contents, list of tables, figures, illustrations, text, bibliography and appendices.

1.7 Significance of the Study

The lack of information handling skills is a common problem faced by KBSR English language teachers. The inability to locate and process information would be a stumbling block in the path of the academic writing of primary school English language teachers attending an in-service training programme. As language is a vehicle for

learning and provides access to information, the course component 'Information Skills' in the 14-week English language Immersion Course, would act as a springboard for linguistic competence amongst primary school English language teachers. The findings of this study is hoped to throw useful light on the problem and facilitate its possible solution.

The knowledge of information handling skills acquired through the course on information skills, would enable the English Language Immersion Course participants to use the information received effectively for their school-based project during practicum, which is known as the practicum report.

On the whole, this study enables the researcher to get an insight into the participants' selection of themes; the extent to which the information skills component has facilitated the course participants' search for information around the themes for relevant use in the practicum report and finally to what extent the participants' skills in writing have been developed through and around these themes. Furthermore, this skill in handling and processing information would be a boon in this information age of smart schools and smart teachers. This study is particularly timely in view of the development of the smart school concept in Malaysia as information access and interpretation is the key element in this concept.

1.8 Limitations of the Study

This study is limited to English Language Immersion Course participants of one college only, that is Maktab Perguruan Temenggong Ibrahim, Johor Bahru although this

course is offered in other Teacher Training Colleges in Malaysia. This is purely due to time constraints as the course is offered for about 14 weeks only. As the researcher was also the instructor of information skills, it made the study worthwhile, more convenient and easier as the sample was readily available. Besides, as the design of the information skills course was left to the discretion of each college, some colleges might have adopted a different approach towards the teaching of the component on Information Skills, thus making the analysis of data a daunting task for the researcher and well beyond the scope of partial fulfilment of thesis like this.

In addition, this study concentrates on the application of information skills in the practicum reports only. No study was done to find out the participants' use of information skills in the other language skills, namely listening, speaking and reading. This was because the primary concern of the researcher in this study was the participants' use of information skills in the practicum reports. Although the researcher concedes the possibility of intercomponent symbiosis in the acquisition of information skills, she felt that taking on all three components was beyond the scope of a master's thesis.

In view of the above limitations, the researcher concentrated specifically on the course participants' use of information skills in the practicum reports, as that was the main aim of this study. Thus in this research, there is an emphasis on participants' use of information skills in selecting and defining the topic, reference skills, recording and organising information for practicum reports. Particular reference is made to participants' use of direct quotations, paraphrasing skills, evaluation of information and summarising

skills. In addition, the content and language of the practicum reports which are integral for the whole information handling process, cannot be ignored or eliminated from evaluation. Thus these two were incorporated into the study.

1.9 Operational Definition of Terms

In this study, the following commonly used but ill-defined terms are used in the way defined below.

1.9.1 Information Skills

These are skills which involve seeking information from a variety of sources, processing the information and applying it appropriately in written assignments or reports.

1.9.2 Academic Writing

Academic writing involves writing of articles, essays, project or research papers for academic purposes. Academic writing serves to disseminate information and to facilitate interaction with the outside world.

In the context of the 14-week English Language Immersion Course, academic writing refers to writing reports on projects carried out during the practicum session. This component is designed to equip course participants with information handling skills in the context of the English language proficiency programme. After being taken through a

course on information skills, participants conduct a school-based study and carry out ESL teaching-learning activities in school. They utilise the information skills learnt and write out their practicum reports, bearing in mind the format, note-taking skills, acknowledgement of sources, bibliography and the audio-visual aids used.

1.9.3 Practicum

The practicum is an important practical aspect of the course. The focus is on course participants' language use and seeks to bridge the gap between experience and classroom teaching. The product of this study is a written and an oral report. Sample recordings of oral interaction while conducting the study form part of the report.

The second aspect of the Practicum, entails conducting ESL teaching-learning activities in the school. The focus on such activities will be the teacher's language use. Only the school-based study will be evaluated.